

Pope Francis and Migrants

Pope Francis is widely admired, even by non-Catholics and non-believers, due to his courageous stance on contentious social issues, humility and sincere concern for the poor and other marginalized members of society. Although he has not fundamentally altered basic Catholic church doctrine, he has dramatically changed the tone and the manner by which the Church's teachings are proclaimed. By practicing what he preaches, and in reaching out to the most vulnerable, Pope Francis has been propagating the Christian faith much more effectively than previous church leaders in modern times.

For those of us who are part of the Philippine diaspora (now estimated at around 10 million Filipinos in various parts of the world), particularly those who are forced to endure prolonged separation from their families, it is hugely comforting to know that the highly admired Pope Francis had on many occasions, expressed a strong concern for the plight of migrants.

During the meeting with the families held at the Mall of Asia arena in Metro Manila on the second day of his visit to the Philippines, Pope Francis expressed deep concern and sympathy for families broken apart by the need to work overseas just to be able to provide for the family's financial needs. He recognized the sad reality that "the economic situation has caused families to be separated by migration and the search for employment."

This simple yet powerful affirmation of the economic realities which force migrants to work in foreign lands is something that had been considered and weighed by policymakers and decision-makers and yet the problems of inequality, exploitation, marginalization and vulnerability of migrants just keep getting worse. Clearly, the policies being put in place by both the sending and receiving nations to address these and other related issues are woefully inadequate and ineffective. Hence the need for stronger advocacy remains, which are greatly reinforced by sincere messages of solidarity by influential leaders like Pope Francis.

Thankfully, aside from his highly-successful visit to the Philippines, Pope Francis had conveyed strong messages of solidarity for migrants. In the 7th World Congress for the Pastoral Care of Migrants held on 21 November 2014, he stated as follows:

Today, notwithstanding new developments and the emergence of situations which are at times painful and even tragic, migration is still an aspiration to hope. Above all in areas of the world in difficulty, where the lack of work prevents individuals and their families from achieving a dignified life, there is a strong drive to seek a better future wherever that may be, even at the risk of disappointment and failure. This is caused in great part by the economic crisis which, to different degrees, is affecting every country in the world.

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Migrants, therefore, by virtue of their very humanity, even prior to their cultural values, widen the sense of human fraternity. At the same time, their presence is a reminder of the need to eradicate inequality, injustice and abuses. In that way, migrants will be able to become partners in constructing a richer identity for the communities which provide them hospitality, as well as the people who welcome them, prompting the development of a society which is inclusive, creative and respectful of the dignity of all.

In yet another "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2014)" he stated:

Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.

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The reality of migration, given its new dimensions in our age of globalization, needs to be approached and managed in a new, equitable and effective manner; more than anything, this calls for international cooperation and a spirit of profound solidarity and compassion.

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Finally, in considering the situation of migrants and refugees, I would point to yet another element in building a better world, namely, the elimination of prejudices and presuppositions in the approach to migration. Not infrequently, the arrival of migrants, displaced persons, asylum-seekers and refugees gives rise to suspicion and hostility. There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase.

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Every human being is a child of God! He or she bears the image of Christ! We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved.

In these times when the ongoing changes to Canada's immigration laws have caused and continue to cause great hardship and various forms of prejudice to many individuals and their families, may these simple yet profound words of solidarity help shape our views and actions towards migrants - whether refugees, temporary foreign workers, international students, visitors, undocumented migrants, prospective and newly-arrived immigrants, or the so-called "others."

As Pope Francis puts it, migrants are not merely problems to be solved, but are people to be welcomed, respected and loved. If personal attitudes and government policymaking can only start from such a premise, more just and humane treatment, policies and decisions will hopefully follow.

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